January/February 2010

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

Depot Town Rag

Volume 24, Number 1

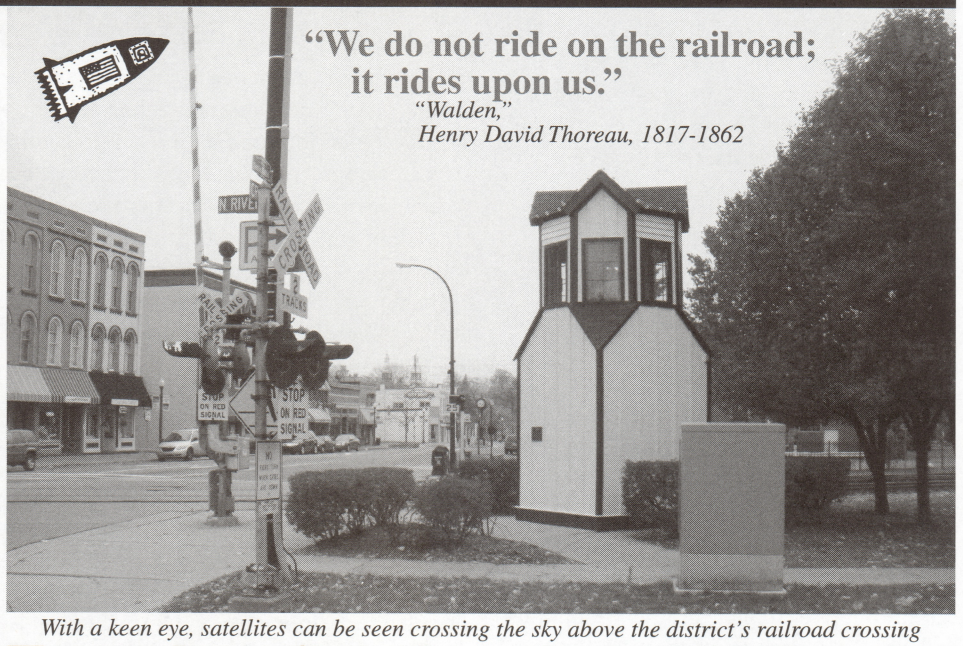
A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

We're still working on that old railroad

Depot Town Downtown Development Authority (DDA) representatives have been meeting with the South Eastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) to plan the return of commuter rail travel between Detroit and Ann Arbor in October of this year.

Even those who have not followed the history of the rise and fall of railroads in America surely understand the implications such a move could have upon Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town district and its relationship to the railroad, the decrepit depot, the historic Freighthouse, and the loyal clientele who kept stopping in this district even when the railroad didn't. This issue of *The Rag* explores some of the possibilities that lie before us with the rebirth of what was once the Michigan Central Railroad at Ypsilanti.

2010 will see the biggest changes in local rail traffic since World War II with the commuter train planning to add Ypsilanti to its daily stops between Ann Arbor, Metro Airport, Dearborn and Detroit. This could have a profound effect upon the quality of life in the neighborhood.



With a keen eye, satellites can be seen crossing the sky above the district's railroad crossing

From the railroad tracks to outer space

The U.S. standard railroad gauge (distance between the rails) is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. That's an exceedingly odd number.

Why was that gauge used? Because that's the way they built them in England, and English expatriates built the U.S. railroads.

Why did the English build them like that? Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used.

Why did 'they' use that gauge then? Because the people who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing.

Why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on some of the old, long distance roads in England, because that's the spacing of the wheel ruts.

So who built those old rutted roads? Imperial Rome built the first long distance roads in Europe (and England) for their legions. The roads have been used ever since.

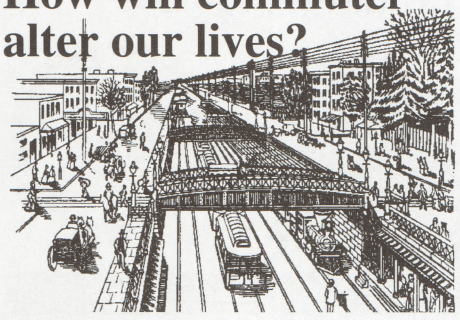
And the ruts in the roads? Roman war chariots formed the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagon wheels. Since the chariots were made for Imperial Rome, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing. Therefore the United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches is derived from the original specifications for an Imperial Roman war chariot. Bureaucracies live forever.

So the next time you are handed a Specification/Procedure/Process and wonder 'What horse's ass came up with this?' you may be exactly right. Imperial Roman army chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the rear ends of two war horses. (Two horses' asses.)

Now, the twist to the story:

When you see a Space Shuttle sitting on its launch pad, there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are solid rocket boosters, or SRBs. The SRBs are made by Thiokol at their factory in Utah. The engineers who designed the SRBs would have preferred to make them a bit fatter, but the SRBs had to be shipped by train *[continued on page two]*

How will commuter alter our lives?



Traffic in Depot Town will certainly change with trains stopping several times a day. The city is going after a grant to improve the north parking lot next to Frog Island and may even move the recycling center.

A 1913 study suggested we raise the railroad tracks on trestles to avoid collisions at grade-crossings. Other towns have submerged the tracks and pretend the noise from the passing trains is merely rumblings from a long-inactive volcano.

Jack Miller says he can remember in the '50s when "wives would line up in their cars on Cross and River Streets, waiting for their husbands" to return from Detroit.

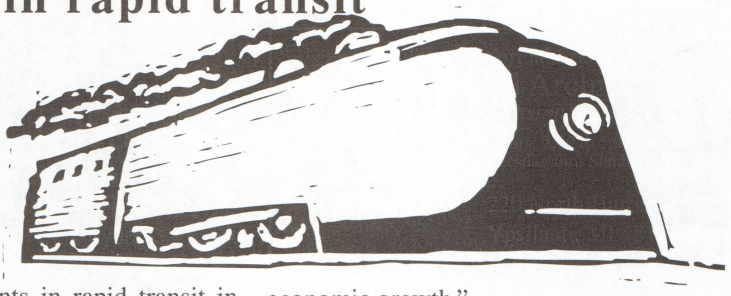
Tracks *[continued from page one]*

from the factory to the launch site. The railroad line from the factory happens to run through a tunnel in the mountains, and the SRBs had to fit through that tunnel. The tunnel is slightly wider than the railroad track, and the railroad track, as you now know, is about as wide as two horses' behinds.

So, a major Space Shuttle design feature of what is arguably the world's most advanced transportation system was determined over two thousand years ago by the width of a horse's ass. And you thought being a horse's ass wasn't important? Ancient horse's asses control almost everything.

Michigan could gain thousands of jobs and billions in new developments by investing in rapid transit

***New Report*:**
Other states realizing huge job and development gains from light rail



Significant investments in rapid transit in Metro Detroit could generate tens of thousands of good jobs and billions of dollars in new development, concludes a report that examined the economic impact of relatively new light rail systems in four major U.S. cities.

The report, "The Economic Case for Light Rail in Detroit," (pdf download available) was produced by Transportation Riders United (TRU), a Detroit nonprofit organization. The report studied light rail systems built in the past 15 years in Dallas, Texas, Minneapolis, Minnesota, St. Louis, Missouri, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Each metro region has gained billions of dollars in new commercial and residential "transit-oriented development" (TOD), thousands of new jobs, property value increases and other substantial economic benefits as direct result of the transit systems (examples).

"The greater Detroit area could achieve billions of dollars in new development and thousands of jobs just like dozens of other cities have, by investing in light rail transit," said TRU Executive Director Megan Owens. "By making major investments in rapid transit, Michigan could jumpstart its economy and plant the seeds for long-term economic growth."

Because many people want to live, work, shop and play near convenient rapid transit, developers in many cities choose to build near transit stations. Research by the American Public Transit Association has found that property values near transit stations are generally 25% higher than similar property elsewhere. Rapid transit systems in the four metro regions examined in the report have sparked massive investments in retail stores, grocery stores, restaurants, residential and other housing units, office buildings, movie theaters, cafes, and more. Many developers point to the rail station as a major factor in deciding to build, a very attractive feature to buyers, and a key to their success.

For decades, southeast Michigan leaders have debated the need to expand public transit. Though various plans have been proposed, not one has been launched successfully.

"Metro Detroit and all of Michigan are paying a high price for not having quality public transit systems anchored by light rail," Owens said. "While rapid transit systems in many other metro areas are creating economic opportunities for all types of

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businesses, we remain on the sidelines."

The light rail systems in Dallas, Minneapolis, Charlotte and St. Louis each cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build, funded by a combination of federal government contributions, state investments and dedicated regional transit taxes. Local officials find the investment well worth it.

Owens said efforts are moving forward on several fronts that could lead to rapid transit in Michigan urban centers:

- The DOT is developing a plan for an eight-mile, $371 million light rail on Woodward Avenue. Applying to the Federal Transit Administration for funding.
- Developing an official tri-county transit plan with plans and timelines for rapid transit lines and bus improvements.
- Planning a rapid transit expansion for a $40.1-million, nine-mile bus-rapid transit line already approved by the Federal Transit Administration.
- Developing recommendations to fund Michigan's transportation system: gas tax increase, other state funding, local funding options.
- Legislation (House Bill 6114) would create an important tool to help fund transit systems.

"While major cities in other states are using rapid transit to create tens of thousands of new jobs and attract billions in new investments, Michigan has largely failed to embrace significant transit alternatives to driving," said MML Executive Director Dan Gilmartin. "HB 6114 is a necessary first step in sparking serious public and private investments in new public transit systems in Michigan."

Artrain moves forward... in trucks

New facility, same great mission

Artrain, the mobile museum authority, is taking to the roads. After starting out in Depot Town with nearly four decades of touring world class art and cultural programs onboard its train museum across America, Artrain unveiled its new semi-trailer based facility design, logo and Website. The changes were initiated to reach more cities, better serve its constituents and continue to fulfill its mission of enriching lives and building communities through the arts. Artrain will hit the road in 2010, traversing the country with state-of-the-art semitrailers, known as mobile museum units (MMU).

"We are excited about this change" said Debra Polich, Artrain president/CEO. "Moving to the road affords us the ability to visit any city in the country and the flexibility to set up in a variety of locations such as city squares, parking lots, fair grounds or soccer fields. We could only reach 30 percent of the country on the rails.

"It's a bittersweet move that we are making as we have had such a wonderful association for so many years with the railways. However, it became apparent that a change was necessary when, as demand for Artrain visits increased from communities across the country, the shipping demands on the rail carriers precluded their ability to transport Artrain."

Artrain has "docked" in Ypsilanti's Depot Town seven times and many attribute its initial arrival with the beginning of the turnaround here.

Artrain worked with the Switch Agency of St. Louis, MO to design expandable semi-trailers for its units that replicate museum facility standards. Each trailer provides approximately 1,000 square feet of gallery space and can be connected to fashion a facility unique to each exhibition.

DTA's 2009 recognitions for lighted train/toy theme holiday window displays

Most creative use of holiday theme and in-store product:

- Apple Annie's & Jim MacDonald's (antique hatbox locomotive)
- Café Racer (toy trains, planes & automobiles)

The J.L. Hudson Beautiful Window Award:

- Enchanted Florist

Real, operating model railroad:

- Clover Computers
- Cafe Racer

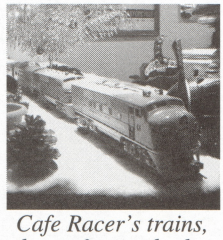
Overall inside/outside theme:

- Sidetrack Bar & Grill and Frenchie's

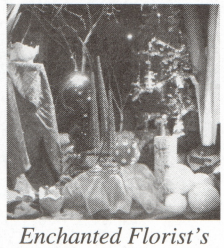
Continuity of theme up and down the street:

- Aubree's Saloon
- Dennis's Music
- Fantasy Attic Costumes
- The Hair Station
- Nelson Amos Studio
- Queen of Hearts Bakery
- Shankwiler 123 Gallery
- Ypsilanti Automotive Museum

James' & Annie's locomotive & snowmen "outside the box"



Cafe Racer's trains, planes, & two-wheelers



Enchanted Florist's holiday fantasy

DTA sends thanks and congratulations to all the merchants who participated and left their lights on for the season.

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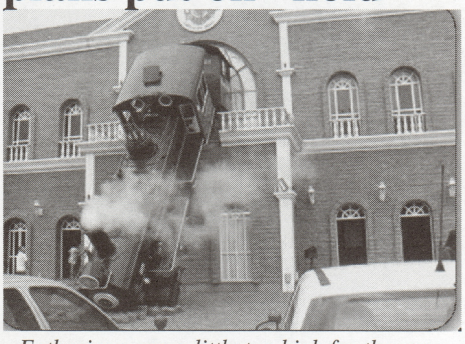
Railroad museum plans put on "hold"



Enthusiasm ran a little too high for the committee working to get their town's railroad museum open to the public this month

Another train song for us to learn

(from Arlo Guthrie's "City of New Orleans")

Riding on the new Detroit commuter
Ann Arbor's east-bound early-morning rail
Just four cars and fifteen sleepy riders,
No conductor and a few small sacks of mail
All along the east-bound odyssey
The train pulls out of Ypsi's Depot Town
Rolls along past houses, farms and fields
Passin' trains that have no names,
Freight yards full of unemployed men
And the graveyards of rusted automobiles.
Good morning Ypsilanti, how are you?
Don't you know me? I've been here before.
I'm the train they call the Detroit Commuter,
I'll be gone some 28 miles when day is done
It's evening on the new Detroit Commuter,
Fall asleep at Dearborn's Henry Ford
I hope that I'll be back in time for dinner
Through the Wayne County darkness
Rolling back to A-Squared Town
And all the towns and people seem
To fade into a real bad dream
These steel rails still ain't heard the news.
The conductor sings his song again,
The passengers will please refrain
From singin' the disappearin' railroad blues
Good night, Ypsilanti, how are you?
Don't you know me? I've been here before
I'm the train called the Detroit Commuter
I'll be home when my grant money is gone.

He plays a familiar tune on this old block

Sean Robinson is starting his second year as a partner at Dennis's Music at 27 East Cross Street, and he comes to the neighborhood with spectacular credentials.

Robinson's a local kid who started out with music lessons from Steve Sommers at Carty's Music in downtown Ypsilanti, then studied at the Los Angeles Music Academy in Pasadena, California. He really got into his specialty at the Galloup School of Lutherie where he was grounded as a professional luthier (late 19th century, as in "lute"), in the working world of guitar making and repair.

Sean and Dennis's most recent creative spurt is planning a weekly music event for the block. They say, "We've got motorcycles on Tuesdays, vintage cars on Thursdays. How about we have one night each week in summer dedicated to creative musicians—a "music night" where musicians bring their instruments down to the plaza to perform, trade, buy, and sell and the rest of the public can just come down to listen?"

Robinson may be on to something. Stay tuned for next summer in Depot Town.

It Can't Happen Here Dept.

No refunds for Aussie train wreck

Australia's Queensland Rail Agency disclosed that it would quickly offer refunds to passengers on a Cairns-to-Brisbane train that crashed just outside Cairns, but reiterated at the same time that it would not pay refunds to survivors of a November 2008 Brisbane-to-Cairns train crash that killed two and injured nine. The difference, according to a Queensland Rail general manger, was that the 2009 trip was just getting underway from Cairns when it crashed, but that the 2008 trip, also near Cairns, was "95 percent over" by the time the deadly crash occurred (and thus, the survivors had basically reached their destination).

In the next *Rag*:

It's about time...
Daylight Savings,
being old and liking it,
passing time, old times,
pastimes, these times,
and good times.

Depot Town Rag

"All the news that fits, we print"
A monthly publication of
the Depot Town Association, Inc.
The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198
To the editor:
thomasdodd@comcast.net

The Depot Town Association, Inc.

Gary McKeever, President
Michelle Shankwiler, Vice President
Ruth Ann Jamnick, Treasurer
Sandee French, Scy. & Past President
Website: www.depottown.org

DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

Big improvements on the way for commuters

Someday our historic Freighthouse may be updated enough to welcome commuters back to the neighborhood and, if grant $ stretch enough, maybe a privacy screen?

-from Kohler's newest applicance ad campaign in the Ayn Rand design tradition

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Stop this train in Ypsi so I can get off, mate
Catch a taxi at the depot and I'll get back home late
I'll stay a while in Depot Town
Let that city jive dissolve a bit
Before I shuffle on
There ain't no pullman porters
Nor sons of engineers
This train's a shallow image of its past.
The Twilight Limited
Couldn't live up to its name in song.
We knew those railroad days
Just couldn't last this long.

Rail passengers will once again catch the train from Ann Arborland to Ypsiland and, if they don't get off here, they can wave as they pass through on the way to Metro Airport, Dearborn, and Detroit.

Twin DDAs merge:
Depot Town & Downtown together again

In the summer of 2009, the two Downtown Development Authorities (DDA) merged into one organization to represent the Downtown, West Cross, and Depot Town commercial districts. The City of Ypsilanti DDA is a board of 12 members plus the mayor. The 12 are appointed by the Mayor and approved by City Council to promote economic development in Ypsilanti. Subject to City Council approval, the DDA may use its bonding capacity and taxes captured through new construction (tax increment financing) to help finance public and public-private developments that encourage the economic vitality of the downtown area.

Right now the DDA is in the process of hiring a Director and re-organizing themselves. They have structured themselves into four Subcommittees (Organization, Design, Economic Restructuring and Promotion) and are looking for volunteers to serve on those subcommittees. Requests should be sent to any member of the DDA Board.

The website DDA is http://ypsilantidda.org/

The full DDA Board meets monthly at 8 a.m on the the third Thursday of the month at Spark East - 215 West Michigan Ave.

Send a request to be put on their email list to receive copies of the agenda and meeting packets to director@ypsilantidda.org

All meetings are open to the public.

The DDA is the City's economic development organization for the Downtown, West Cross and Depot Town areas.

Any ideas, suggestions, issues would be welcome. DDA members and their contact information is below:

Dave Wheeler - Chair dwheeler@uiscorp.com
Bob Barnes bob@barnesapts.com
John Coleman jcoleman@lookintheattic.com
Darryl Daniels darryl@jacobsendaniels.com
John Donegan jdonega1@emich.edu
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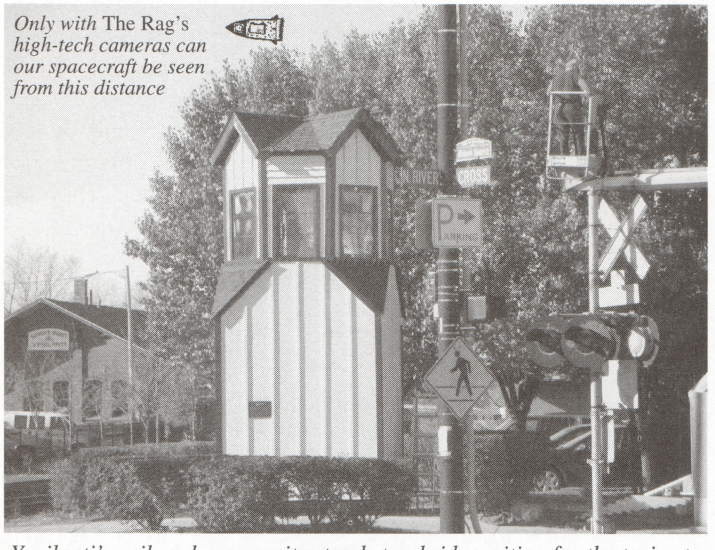
Karen Maurer krm@ypsi.com
Peter Rinehart peter@bombadills.com
Paul Schreiber Mayor@cityofypsilanti.com

DDA

If we can be of any assistance feel free to contact us.

Pete Murdock 485-7799 pmurdock@cityofypsilanti.com
Brian Robb 485-9122 brobb@cityofypsilanti.com
Ward Three City Councilmembers *[Depot Town members in italics]*



Ypsilanti's railroad community stands trackside waiting for the trains to start stopping again. SEMCOG says it'll happen in October 2010.

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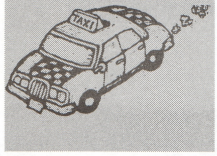
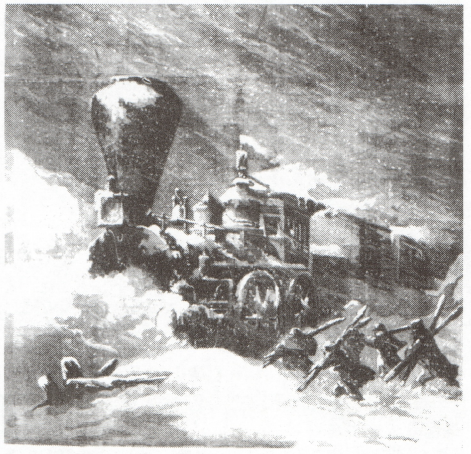
"Hold the train for those folks from Ypsi."



Don't let winter deter SEMCOG's progress with the railroads



At the height of the last big romance about the MCRR trains that ran through here, the cover of **Harper's Weekly Journal** *found great romance in the snow storm of January 23, 1864 with this artist's rendering of a snow-bound train and the dramatic caption: "Suffering in a snow-storm on the Michigan Central ..." Apparently the "suffering" did not inhibit their popular ridership, as the trains continued rolling from Niagara Falls, NY, through Depot Town and on to Chicago, IL, well into 1901.*

Chewin' *The Rag* again

The DTA Caboose, winter 2008/9

Readers seem to miss the trains almost as much as they miss their daily newsaper and locals have complained of the absence of the regular question/opinion column in recent issues of *The Rag*. The feature ended in 1996 when people stopped asking questions. Known in journalism circles as The End of Curiosity, the period may have reached finality when DTA did not publish its monthly newsletter in February and April. January and March issues were two-monthers.

Two months with no news elicited dozens of questions from our readers and it may take the rest of the year to respond to them. Herewith is a resurgent installment:

• Whatever happened to cabooses at the end of freight trains?

Like jungle expeditions in the movies, one car at a time was picked off from the end of passing trains by newly organized neighborhood improvement associations. A few were taken "up north" for vacation cabins. Others were turned into backyard playhouses for children with no access to the Internet.

DTA's 100+ year-old caboose in Depot Town is just waiting for an authentically restored steam train to hitch it up for another ride across the country.

Send your railroadiana queries to the editor: thomasdodd@comcast.net

RAGTIME
Coming events

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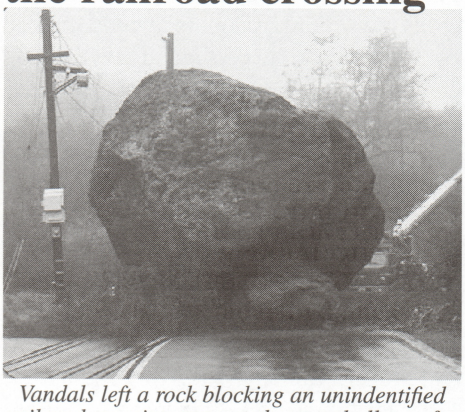
Trouble still awaits at the railroad crossing



Vandals left a rock blocking an unindentified railroad crossing apparently as a challenge for more access to cheaper public transportation

If last fall's street closings resulting from the September 23 Thompson Block fire were any indication, folks down here are accustomed to disastrous events at the crux of the railroad tracks, and Cross/River Streets. We've seen train wrecks, car crashes, truck collisions, and sudden deaths of people, horses, and pets stepping in front of passing trains.

This winter's scaffolding at the intersection is a reminder to many that we should never take those tracks for granted. It's difficult to not hear the train as it approaches but, with iPod plugs in our ears and a cell phone in our face, we can be distracted and...quickly pulverized into lunch meat.

The last reported suicide-by-train here was in the late 1970s, when a long-retired railroad worker waved goodbye to his old pals on the street and jumped in front of the Conrail locomotive as it sped west.

Firefighters arrived with hoses and plastic garbage bags to pick up the pieces. The largest portion found was the victim's rib cage. One worker said, "Everything else was 'finger food'."

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